

U. S. to Buy Cuba Prisoners?

The Capital Ransom Mystery—

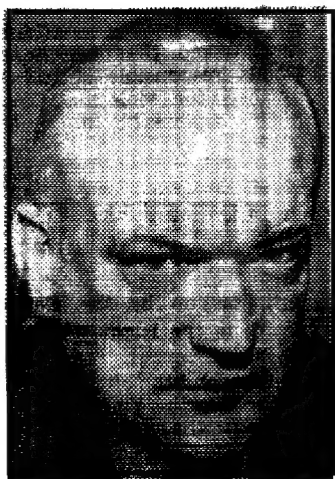
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By Robert J. Donovan

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WASHINGTON.



James B. Donovan

It is widely believed here that James B. Donovan has acted as a United States government agent in negotiations for release of Cuban prisoners. It is also widely believed that some Federal funds may be paid to Fidel Castro in one form or another for ransom.

One unconfirmed report last night was that the government would underwrite shipment of some \$13 million in medicine and food to Cuba if the 1,113 Bay of Pigs prisoners were freed. This would supplement funds being raised privately by the Cuban Families Committee. Premier Fidel Castro originally demanded \$62 million for release of the prisoners but reportedly has since reduced the figure to \$60 million.

Mr. Donovan met with Castro yesterday in what may be the final step in negotiations for the release of the prisoners, United Press International said in a Havana dispatch.

At the Department of Justice, Edwin O. Guffman,

director of Public Information, denied a published report that Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy had in effect engineered the appointment of Mr. Donovan as the negotiator for the Cuban Families Committee.

This denial did not, however, quiet the speculation that Mr. Donovan is not only an agent of the committee but of the Central Intelligence Agency as well. Just as he was in negotiating the release of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers from the Soviet Union last winter.

The full truth about Mr. Donovan's role and about the policy on spending government money for ransom is impossible to get at because of the ironclad secrecy the Kennedy administration has wrapped around the affair. The ostensible reason for this secrecy is that premature disclosures might jeopardize the release of the prisoners in the touch-and-go negotiations.

In the meantime assumptions being drawn about the Administration's activities are producing new outcries in Congress.

"It is time to let the people of the country know what this deal is," Rep. William C. Cramer, R., Fla., told the

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Robert F. Kennedy

House of Representatives. "This whole deal smells, which is obvious because of its secret nature. How must we look in the eyes of the world in asking other countries to cut off trade with Cuba while at the same time allowing a private citizen (Mr. Donovan) to negotiate \$60 million in trade with Cuba's Castro?"

In the Senate, Sens. John J. Williams, R., Del., and John Stennis, D., Miss., opposed the use of government funds to ransom the prisoners.

At the White House Pierre Salinger, Presidential press secretary, refused to say whether any such expenditure was contemplated. Since the Administration has adopted a policy of strict secrecy, Mr. Salinger's silence does not necessarily suggest that Federal ransom money is to be paid.

Sen. Williams said in a speech that he had read news reports that Mr. Donovan was acting as a Federal agent and that the government would "put up a substantial amount of the ransom." These reports, he said, were disturbing, and he hoped they were untrue. If they are false, he urged the Administration to deny them.

The critical attitude which Republicans in Congress have taken toward the idea of spending Federal funds for ransom payments to Castro in any form indicates that any such step by President Kennedy might quickly mushroom into a major issue in the current Congressional election campaign.

House Republicans sent the President telegrams yesterday asking for specific information.

They Want to Know

Rep. John J. Rhodes, Ariz., asked to know the "amount of money which has been or will be committed to the ransom from foreign aid appropriations and the categories of aid from which such commitments have been or will be made."

Rep. Robert H. Michel, Ill., asked the President if the Administration has "offered anything, through Donovan or otherwise, as payment or part payment of the ransom."

At the Justice Department Mr. Guthman branded as "untrue" a story that Attorney General Kennedy had asked Mr. Donovan, who has since become the Democratic nominee for United States Senator in New York, to represent the Cuban Families Committee.

"He (Mr. Kennedy) did not see Donovan at the time Donovan was hired by the relatives of the prisoners to represent them," Mr. Guthman explained.

"We're Not Saying That"

But, a reporter asked, was it not true that the Attorney General had seen Mr. Donovan since then and had discussed the prisoners with him?

"We're not saying that," Mr. Guthman replied.

Mr. Donovan has seen the Attorney General several times since last June. Once he was accompanied by a State Department official.

Ostensibly as the attorney for Rudolf I. Abel, a Russian spy then imprisoned in the United States, Mr. Donovan negotiated the exchange whereby the United States swapped Abel for Capt. Powers.

Hand-in-Glove With CIA

In fact, however, he was working hand-in-glove with the CIA. Indeed when the exchange had been consummated, President Kennedy directed the CIA to award Mr. Donovan its Distinguished Intelligence Medal. The medal was presented last March by John A. McCone, director of Central Intelligence.

In the absence of full information from the Administration, the logic of the present situation has led observers here to believe that Mr. Donovan is again playing the role of government agent while ostensibly working for the Cuban Families Committee.

White House officials have acknowledged that the Committee is keeping the President and the Administration advised about its activities.